

Local Development Framework Core Strategy

Examination - 24 June to 11 July, 2008



Hearing Statement in respect of Matter 7

Essex County Council



MATTER 7

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Whether the strategy and policies recognise the locally distinctive natural environment and successfully balance its protection and enhancement with accommodating growth.

Tests: 4-9

Policy: NE1

ISSUES

- (a) Should policy NE1 be renamed and reworded to cover historic as well as natural environment, should a separate policy on the historic environment be provided or is it covered by UR2? Should the key issues and vision and objectives be reworded to reflect this?

Yes – it is proposed that this policy is renamed as ENV 1 - Environment and rewording has been suggested to include reference to the historic environment. These changes have been included in the Proposed Schedule of Minor Changes (CBC/EB/078).

- (b) Is there a conflict between growth and the environment in the rural areas?

Colchester Borough Council's Core Strategy has been prepared in accordance with the key principles of both Planning Policy Statement 9: Biodiversity & Geo-diversity and Planning Policy Statement 7 Sustainable Development in Rural Areas. PPS9 identifies the need to include policies in Core Strategies that enable planning decisions to be taken that help conserve, maintain, enhance, restore and increase opportunities for biodiversity and geodiversity conservation. PPS9 stipulates the need for mitigation measures to minimise the impact on biodiversity/geodiversity where development is proposed. These issues have been fully addressed in Policy ENV1 in the Core Strategy.

PPS7 promotes the protection of rural landscapes and the environment through the delivery of sustainably located developments on previously developed land (PDL) within existing settlement boundaries. The Core Strategy strongly supports this approach as demonstrated in Policies SD1, ENV1 and ENV2.

The potential for conflict between growth and the environment has been assessed during the development of the Core Strategy. A range of strategic and policy specific options have been considered through the

SA process during the development of the Core Strategy DPD. Those options which were likely to be most damaging to the environment were rejected.

The following paragraphs demonstrate the various stages when the conflict between growth and the environment was assessed;

At the Issues and Options stage two housing options were proposed for growth in rural areas. These were:

Option C- developing selected small towns and larger villages

Option G – village infill and edge of villages.

Option C was considered to be an unviable option and was subsequently dismissed after the Issues and Options stage as it predominantly involved the development of greenfield land away from the main urban centre, contrary to national guidance. Option G was carried forward and assessed as Option E at the Preferred Options stage. This option was slightly amended and further assessed as Option 4 at the Amended Preferred Options stage. The environmental implications of this option are discussed in more detail further in the report.

At the Preferred Options stage various strategic options for transport and employment were also assessed in the accompanying SA in terms of the relationship between these two issues, the location of new housing and wider sustainability considerations including environmental protection.

Early in this process the SA enabled a decision to be made by CBC that a significant amount of the new growth in the Borough should be directed towards the Town Centre and existing Regeneration Areas. This was considered the most sustainable approach strategically as it maximised the use of brownfield land, and ensured that new development was concentrated close to sources of employment, key services and existing transport hubs. This approach reduced the need to direct large amounts of new development to greenfield sites thereby reducing potential adverse impacts on the landscape and nature conservation assets.

During the Amended Preferred Options stage, Option C [Option 4 in the accompanying Sustainability Appraisal (SA)] assessed the viability of extending district settlements and villages. Option C was not considered sustainable in comparison to the preferred approach which sought to deliver growth in concentrated locations with good accessibility and supported limited development in villages to meet a local need.

Of the strategic options assessed, Option C was dismissed as it would disperse development to predominantly greenfield locations with relatively low access to shops employment and services. This option would also make it difficult to support new communities with the necessary infrastructure and facilities. Finally there would be adverse

impacts on the countryside and landscape character caused by the need to develop on greenfield sites.

The SA accompanying the Submitted Core Strategy DPD assessed the potential conflicts between growth and the environment under a number of other options presented below.

Policy SD1- Sustainable Development

In section 5.1.2 of the Submitted Core Strategy's SA (CBC/SUB/002 p.53), the second sustainable development option proposed continuing development within established regeneration areas, with substantial amounts of new development i.e. roughly 5000 homes and new employment opportunities at various greenfield locations to the west of Colchester Town, between Stanway and Marks Tey, and amongst various villages as well as on the urban fringe of Colchester Town.

This Option was dismissed in the SA as it would not optimise the opportunities to regenerate existing communities or direct development towards sustainable locations. Option 2 would also have adverse implications for climate change and the countryside.

Policy CE1 - Centres & Employment

In Section 5.2.2 of the SA accompanying the Submitted Core Strategy (CBC/SUB/002 p. 56) two further options were considered which assessed the most sustainable location for employment and economic developments in the Borough.

Option 2 proposed maintaining current land uses, and allocating additional land for new employment at greenfield locations at the urban fringe. The SA dismissed Option 2 on the grounds that allowing most new development to locate at edge of town locations would reduce accessibility and have adverse implications for the regeneration of the Town Centre and the preservation of the countryside.

Policy H1- Housing Delivery

Potential conflicts between growth and the environment were further considered in Options 2 and 4 of the Housing Delivery Options in section 5.3.2 in the SA accompanying the submitted Core Strategy (CBC/SUB/002 p.70).

Option 2 proposed directing the majority of the 19,000 homes to Colchester Town, with urban extensions at alternative locations to the south of Colchester Town and to the west of Stanway. This option was dismissed due to the adverse impacts an urban extension to the south of Colchester Town could have upon important conservation areas, including Friday Woods SSSI, the Abberton Reservoir Ramsar site and Special Protection Area, Areas of Landscape Importance, and areas of archaeological value (e.g. Gosbecks Archaeological Park). It was felt that these environmental constraints would also limit the potential for

development and the supporting transport infrastructure that would be needed to service the development.

Under Option 4 new housing development would be directed towards district settlements and other villages in the Borough. Significant amounts of new development (3000 – 5000 homes) would be delivered through extensions to rural settlements. This option did not involve any urban extensions to Colchester Town and there was less development proposed within the existing regeneration areas.

Option 4 was dismissed as it would result in dispersed development predominantly at greenfield locations where access to shops, employment and services would be relatively low. Difficulties would arise when trying to support these new communities with the necessary facilities and infrastructure and new development at such locations would also likely have an adverse impact on the countryside and landscape character.

Policy ENV1 - Environment

When assessing Policy Options for the Natural Environment ENV1 Option 2 proposed steering new development to greenfield locations rather than focusing development on previously developed land. This option would allow incremental development between Colchester Town and the surrounding villages to maximise the delivery of housing and employment development.

Option 1 proposed conserving and enhancing Colchester's natural environment, countryside and coastline by protecting, maintaining and enhancing strategic green links and green breaks between the rural hinterland, river corridors and key green spaces within Colchester Town and Stanway and the surrounding towns and villages. This option proposed a general presumption against greenfield development, and limited new development in rural locations to schemes that helped protect or enhance the landscape and environment. This option also stipulated the need for new development to minimise and mitigate against the adverse impacts on river, coastal and ground water quality as well as flood risk.

The SA concluded that Option 1 would ensure that the proposed growth set out in the Core Strategy would not result in adverse impacts on the environment, would best protect the Borough's natural heritage and supported the aspiration to locate development at sustainable locations which made efficient use of land.

Although it was recognised that Option 2 would enable higher levels of housing and employment to be delivered, it was dismissed as a viable option as it would dilute the focus on directing new development to town centre/previously developed sites with good access to public transport.

Option 2 was also rejected due the adverse implications for the countryside and landscape character of some areas.

Policy ENV 2- Rural Communities

Policy ENV 2 promotes small scale appropriate development within rural settlements on previously developed land that meets local needs, minimises environmental degradation and is in harmony with the local built character and surrounding natural environment. Three options were assessed in the SA accompanying the submitted Core Strategy for this policy.

Policy option 1 supported appropriate development of village infill sites and on previously developed land. It also provided that the design and construction of new village developments should be high quality in all respects and contribute to the needs of the local community. Outside village boundaries, the option was supportive of small-scale rural business schemes that help meet local employment needs, minimise negative environmental impacts and are in harmony with the local built character and the surrounding natural environment.

Policy option 2 discouraged any new development in villages to ensure preservation of their character. Option 3 promoted significant amounts of development in and around village locations to meet both locally generated and wider housing needs.

The SA determined that both options 1 and 3 could help meet housing, employment and community facilities targets, while option 2 would not as it would restrict further village development. In addition Option 2 would not encourage the regeneration of villages or support the delivery of local community facilities, affordable housing and open space. For these reasons Option 2 was dismissed.

Option 1 was considered to be more sustainable than option 3 because it encouraged the redevelopment of brownfield land within established settlements close to existing services, but avoided large amounts of greenfield development, thus avoiding a conflict between growth and the protection of the environment.

Option 3 allowed for significant development at locations with low access to shops, services, employment and education. This option would therefore involve a loss of countryside and open spaces, and increase the reliance on the car and its associated impacts. For these reasons option 1 was identified as the preferred option for inclusion in the Submitted Core Strategy.

Policies in Colchester Borough Council's submitted Core Strategy were also assessed in terms of any likely significant environmental impacts on European Sites specifically. This was required to ensure compliance with the European Habitats Regulations (1994).

The Appropriate Assessment was prepared as part of the evidence base to support the Core Strategy and it considered the potential impact of development on the integrity of European Sites (including Ramsar Sites) which in Colchester are located principally at the coast and in rural parts of the Borough.

The Appropriate Assessment identified that the cumulative recreational demand from new homes required by the East of England Plan could have significant adverse impacts on European sites. The key impacts likely to arise from the proposed growth were increasing demand for water needed to serve the new developments, risk to water quality and increased recreational pressures from the expanded population in the Borough.

The AA identified the need to mitigate for the increased recreational impacts on designated European Sites, through the provision of alternative areas of open space to alleviate pressure on sensitive sites.

Policy PR1 in the Core Strategy and the Open Space, Sport and Recreation SPD seeks to secure developers contributions toward the provision of strategic open space in all new developments. The proposed greenfield urban extensions are intended to deliver significant areas of strategic open space as part of new development to help meet the needs of the wider community. The Open Space PPG 17 Study (CBC/EB/40) prepared in accordance with PPG17 identified a generally high level of open space available in the urban south area of Colchester Town. These sites will also help provide mitigation against the impacts of focusing future growth in Colchester Town. New quantity, quality and accessibility standards have been set in the PPG17 study for Open Space, Sport and Recreation facilities and these will help guide negotiations with developers for provision as part of new developments.

The Haven Gateway Green Infrastructure Strategy has also assessed green space deficiencies across the sub region in light of planned growth. A number of projects have been identified for Colchester, that once implemented will provide new areas of neighbourhood, district, sub regional and regional greenspace to meet current and future population needs and relieve pressure on sensitive European and International sites.

These measures combined should provide sufficient open space to meet recreational needs in the Borough, and minimise impacts on European sites. Visitor numbers at European Sites will need to be monitored and further site management measures put in place where necessary i.e. where recreational pressures are found to be affecting the integrity of the European Sites in the Borough.

The provision of private/communal, public and strategic open spaces will also help retain biodiversity in urban areas, and design guidance (e.g.

Urban Place Supplement) should seek to ensure that the ecological context of sites is considered by development proposals.

These measures collectively demonstrate that potential conflicts between development in the Borough and environmental impacts have been widely considered and measures put in place to minimise negative impacts.

This issue will be considered further during the development of the Site Allocations and Development Policies DPD's. As part of the Site Allocations DPD, development sites will be assessed against a broad list of criteria, including environmental criteria. This process should provide a mechanism to filter out sites of high nature conservation, landscape, historic and archaeological importance, which will ensure that the risk of development impacting negatively on the environment is reduced or mitigated for in accordance with PPS9.

- (c) KD1 shows Areas of Landscape Conservation Importance. Where is this term explained? This element of the supporting text to policy NE1 could be clarified with minor re-wording.

The term "Areas of Landscape Conservation Importance" (ALCI) is explained on page 25 of the Review of Countryside Conservation Areas on Colchester Borough report (ref. CBC/EB/037). This report was prepared by Chris Blandford Associates as part of a revised Landscape Character Assessment for the Borough of Colchester.

ALCI's replace earlier Countryside Conservation Area designations in accordance with the Colchester Borough Local Plan Inspector's Report 2003 (CBC/EB/066), which recommended a review of the Countryside Conservation Areas as part of a wider Landscape Character Assessment study of the Borough.

Rural parts of the borough were evaluated in terms of their landscape quality, conservation interests, tranquillity and cultural associations and categorised into highest, high, moderate and low value landscapes.

The review of Countryside Conservation Areas of Colchester report concluded that the areas of countryside outside the Dedham Vale AONB, evaluated as being highest or high value represented the most important parts of the Borough in landscape terms reflecting the landscapes with:

1. the strongest visual and scenic qualities
2. rare landscape features and elements of exceptional quality within the Borough context
3. areas with extensive or numerous sites of conservation interest

4. landscapes with a strong sense of wilderness, remoteness and tranquillity
5. places with strong cultural and historical associations.

The report proposed the designation of these as Areas of Landscape Conservation Importance as a replacement to the Countryside Conservation Areas.

PPS7 states that landscapes outside nationally designated areas cannot always be protected by criteria based policies within LDD's. Where a Local Authority proposes to introduce or retain a local landscape designation within their LDD's, PPS7 requires that these should be fully justified through a formal and robust assessment to evaluate the qualities of the landscapes requiring protection.

The Review of Countryside Conservation in Colchester Borough provides a sound assessment to support the designation of Areas of Landscape Conservation Importance (ALCI) across Colchester Borough.

Proposed re-wording of supporting text Env1 has been included within the Schedule of Proposed Minor Changes, as follows:

Those areas evaluated as being of "highest" or high landscape character importance are considered to represent the most important of the Borough in landscape terms. ***These will be designated as "Areas of Landscape Conservation Importance" and will replace and amend the former Countryside Conservation Areas.*** The landscape areas and conservation designations have been illustrated on the key diagrams.

- (d) Where and how will alternative open space be provided to reduce pressure on Natura 2000 sites?

The provision of alternative open space to relieve pressure on Natura 2000 sites will be supported by policies ENV1 (Environment) and PR1 (Open Space) in the Core Strategy. ENV1 states that developments likely to have an adverse impact on Natura 2000 sites will not be supported. This is in accordance with Colchester Borough Council's statutory responsibilities under the Habitats Regulations 1994.

Policy PR1 includes the need for future development to provide new areas of open space to alleviate recreational pressure on sites of high nature conservation value, particularly Natura 2000 sites in the borough (Core Strategy Submission Document p.53 ref CBC/SUB/001).

The issue is also addressed in Policy SD2 which states that new development will be expected to provide the necessary community facilities including provision for open space, sport and recreation facilities (Core Strategy Submission Document p.35 ref CBC/SUB/001). The Council will seek developers contributions from new developments to ensure that the existing and future community needs identified in the PPG17 study are met in relation to open space, sport and recreational facilities (PPG17 – Open Space Sport and Recreation ref CBC/EB/040).

The Haven Gateway Green Infrastructure Study (HGGIS) (CBC/EB/067) also highlighted the need to increase the provision of accessible natural green space (ANGS) within the Haven Gateway area.

HGGIS identified different scales of ANGS to be provided i.e. regional, district, neighbourhood, and local as part of the overall growth in the region. HGGIS included an analysis of ANGS provision in terms of size and function, an assessment of the population it serves, and identified areas of ANGS deficiency. It also included a set of standards initially promoted by Natural England (as published in the document 'A Space for Nature', 1996), and further refined by the Town and Country Planning Association ('Biodiversity by Design: A Guide for Sustainable Communities', 2004) and others (e.g. the Woodland Trust).

The standards were used to promote the area of ANGS that should be available to people within a given distance of their home. The standards used in HGGIS are set out below:

- Neighbourhood Level ANGS - 2ha+ of ANGS within 300m of home
- District Level ANGS 20ha+ of ANGS within 1.2km of home
- Sub-regional Level ANGS 60ha+ of ANGS within 3.2km of home
- Regional Level ANGS 500ha+ of ANGS within 10km of home.

Policies PR1 and SD2 relate principally to the provision of neighbourhood and district level ANGS as well as sport and recreation facilities within new development. This will be delivered through the Open Space, Sport and Recreation SPD /Section 106 negotiations. Policy SD2 however also mentions that in some circumstances development will be expected to contribute to the delivery of strategic level projects that support sustainable development and deliver wider community benefits.

During the development of HGGIS a list of projects was identified to address the neighbourhood, district, sub-regional and regional level Accessible Natural green Space (ANGS) deficiencies across the Haven Gateway area. HGGIS concluded that Colchester Borough is most deficient in regional level ANGS i.e. open space over 500ha+ and

proposed a number of potential projects to the south of the Borough for implementation in the future. These projects have been included in the Infrastructure Trajectory however they require funding and will be considered for funding in the forthcoming Integrated Development Programme.

These two approaches ensure that adequate new areas of open space, sport and recreation facilities are provided close to new developments to meet everyday community needs but also recognise the need to provide larger more strategic ANGS sites that have the potential to alleviate pressure on sensitive European Sites. The proposed ANGS sites within the Borough will be assessed as part of the Site Allocations DPD and Development Control Policies DPD processes.

The Council commissioned PMP Ltd in early 2007 to undertake a PPG17 study to assess local needs in terms of Open Space, Sport and Recreation facilities provision across the Borough of Colchester.

The study involved extensive consultation with parish councils, local residents groups, schools, Councillors, council officers in Leisure Services and a questionnaire survey of 5000 households randomly selected off the electoral registrar. As part of this work PMP also completed an audit of the existing open space, sport and recreation facilities borough wide.

Results from the audit and the public consultations were used to identify current open space, sport and recreation facilities surpluses and/or deficiencies borough wide.

Standards defined in the current Open Space, Sport and Recreation SPD (CBC/EB/012) were tested in terms of quantity, quality and accessibility against existing population numbers and estimated population growth for the Borough. This was necessary to identify where surpluses or deficiencies currently exist, and where these are likely to improve or become worse, in response to population change.

As a result, new accessibility, quantity and quality standards were proposed to ensure an adequate provision of open space, sport and recreation facilities to meet the existing and future population needs of the Borough to 2021.

The PPG17 study identified key areas of deficiencies in open space, sport and recreational facilities across different catchment areas within the borough and these can start to be addressed through developers contributions and other sources of funding where available. The Parks and Green Space Strategy will reflect the findings and the Open Space, Sport and Recreation SPD (ref. CBC/EB/012) will need to be reviewed

to reflect the new standards and will remain an important tool for securing/negotiating new open space, sport and recreational facilities contributions. This will be essential to ensure that new developments provide areas of open space and/or recreational facilities close to where people live that meet local needs and help alleviate pressure on Natura 2000 sites.

The Appropriate Assessment (AA) (CBC/SUB/011) that was completed to assess the likely significant impacts of Core Strategy proposals, identified increasing non-physical (visual and acoustic disturbance to fauna by human presence) and physical disturbance (actual damage/degradation of European Sites arising from direct human activity) as a result of proposed additional housing and tourism facilities in the borough as potential key threats to the integrity of European Sites in the future. The AA linked an increase in housing numbers with likely increased visitor pressure and demand for access to international sites/Natura 2000 sites for recreation.

The AA distinguished between weekday disturbance and weekend disturbance. The AA related weekday disturbance to recreational activities like dog walking and people exercising. Disturbance levels at European Sites are likely to be higher at weekends as people tend to make longer car journeys to these highly attractive locations to participate in recreational activities (CBC/SUB/011 p.38).

To address the issues of non physical and physical disturbance the AA has proposed a number of avoidance measures to protect the integrity of the European sites in the borough of Colchester.

The AA suggested that weekday disturbance could be easily offset by providing open space closer to where people live as shown in avoidance measure 3 set out in the (CBC/SUB/011 p.43).

The AA argued that weekend disturbance is not easily reduced by the provision of local open spaces and suggested the need for CBC to put a programme in place to survey and monitor visitor number levels at European sites for land and water based recreational activities and implement new site management measures where adverse impacts are recorded on a site as a result of the recreational activities. (See Measure 1 on page 42 of the AA (CBC/SUB/011). A detailed programme for monitoring visitor pressure and resulting impacts on Natura 2000 sites needs to be worked up with neighbouring authorities and Natural England and is outside the scope of the Core Strategy Development Plan Document.

- (e) Does the Coastal Protection Belt remain protected by saved LP policies CE1 and CO3 pending the Development Control Policies DPD? Should it be shown on Key Diagram 1? Cross boundary links issue with County Council and neighbouring districts e.g. Chelmsford. Pg 62 does not explain what the Coastal Protection Belt is, should there be re-wording to assist clarity?

The Coastal Protection Belt aims to protect the rural and undeveloped coastline from inappropriate development that would adversely affect its open character and irreplaceable assets, landward and marine sites of nature conservation importance, and buildings and areas of special architectural, historic or archaeological importance.

The Belt applies to the undeveloped coastline throughout Essex. Its spatial extent was first defined in a subject plan and has been covered by a strategic policy in successive adopted structure plans, latterly in the Adopted Essex & Southend Replacement Structure Plan, April 2001. The Secretary of State issued a statutory direction in September 2007 that this policy should be 'saved' and continue to apply after this date.

This long established policy is being carried forward into the new development plans system. For example, it has been included in the Chelmsford Core Strategy & Development Control Policies DPD (adopted in February 2008), which is the first core strategy to be statutorily adopted in the Essex administrative area.

As this is a County-wide policy, consistency of approach requires that it should be subsumed within each of the DPD's for the six constituent individual Essex coastal districts. Accordingly, the policy is also now being carried forward within the Colchester Core Strategy DPD.

The Belt's rural and undeveloped coastline is of national and regional significance for its open and rural landscape character, heritage features, and nature conservation interest. These multiple assets are strongly focussed and interrelated within the defined area, including between the coastline and adjoining inland areas. The Belt has a unique and irreplaceable character which should be strongly protected and enhanced.

National planning policy is relevant including that set out within PPS7, PPS9, PPS25, and PPG20. This contains policy applicable to rural undeveloped areas. However, because the Coastal Protection Belt has a unique and irreplaceable character, there is a local need for greater priority to be given to the restraint of potentially damaging development, than is normally possible under national planning policies which must necessarily be expressed in very general terms only.

The emerging East of England Plan includes a strategic policy in relation to the rural and undeveloped coast (Policy SS9), but this is general, high level, and non-specific in terms of spatial application. It gives insufficient recognition and policy protection to the unique and irreplaceable character of the Essex Coastal Protection Belt.

Moreover, at a more strategic borough level, the unique characteristics and local circumstances of the undeveloped coast are specifically different from other parts of Colchester borough where countryside protection, landscape conservation, and green break policies normally apply. This distinctive character sets the undeveloped coast apart in planning policy terms, and is further justification for special policy treatment in terms of applying Coastal Protection Belt policy.

It is particularly important that the Belt is protected from development that would adversely affect its open and rural landscape character, heritage features, and nature conservation interest. This covers a variety of potential coastal development whether in built-form or of a more open character. Some examples include – the re-use or replacement of existing buildings; equine-related activities; forestry; tourism activities; outdoor recreation, including water recreation; ports, wharves, and boat marinas; energy generation; mineral extraction; and waste management facilities. It might also include certain types of proposed new infrastructure such as coast protection and defence works, barrages, waste water and sewage treatment plants, and pipelines.

Proposed Amendment to Policy ENV1

The Statement of Common Ground between Essex County Council and Colchester Borough Council jointly agrees that the submitted Core Strategy DPD should take forward the existing policy for the Coastal Protection Belt within the document. In particular, an additional paragraph should be added to Policy ENV1 as follows:

‘Within the Coastal Protection Belt development will not be permitted that would adversely affect the open and rural character of the undeveloped coastline, and its historic features, wildlife habitats or other sites of nature conservation importance.’

It is further jointly agreed that the Key Diagram should be revised to acknowledge the application of the Coastal Protection Belt policy.

Explanatory Text

Therefore, having regard to the above considerations, it is suggested that the explanatory supporting text for Policy NE1 in the submitted DPD should be amended to state,

'The Essex Coastal Protection Belt was first defined in a subject plan, and covered by a policy in the Essex & Southend-on-Sea Replacement Structure Plan which has subsequently been saved by the Secretary of State. The policy designation is now carried forward into this document.

The purpose of this Essex-wide policy is to protect the unique and irreplaceable character of the rural and undeveloped coastline from inappropriate development. The area is of national and regional significance for its open and rural landscape character, heritage features, and nature conservation interest. Because of the special character and function of the Coastal Protection Belt, there is a local need to provide additional policy protection to this area, in addition to the national, regional, and other local policies that normally apply.'

If this amendment is included in the Core Strategy there will no longer be a need to save Policy CE1 from the Adopted Review Colchester Borough Local Plan (CBC/EB/011.) This has been shown in the Schedule of Proposed Minor Changes. Policy CO3 will however remain saved until superseded by the Development Policies DPD, the Site Allocations DPD and the Proposals Map.

- (f) Should policy NE1 be more flexible to include the possibility of suitable compatible development in green breaks?

Policy NE1 clearly states that Colchester Borough Council will seek to maintain the strategic green breaks between Colchester Town and Stanway and the surrounding towns and villages. The green breaks between Colchester Town Centre and surrounding settlements contribute to the overall attractiveness of the Borough generally and also provide valuable biodiversity corridors. In addition, the green breaks also prevent existing settlements coalescing and help create the attractive landscape setting that defines and characterises the distinctive character of villages and rural communities throughout the Borough.

The primary purpose and function of the green breaks is to maintain separation between the main urban areas of the District. They also seek to maintain separation between urban areas and freestanding smaller settlements that surround them, or between physically separate built-up neighbourhoods. By conserving the countryside between residential areas, local green break policies aim to preserve the open character of these important breaks between settlements. This approach will also maintain the individual character and landscape setting of towns, villages and neighbourhoods.

The identification and importance of Green Breaks in landscape setting terms is supported by the findings of the Landscape Character Assessment (CBC/EB/035/6/7). In addition to their role in maintaining settlement separation, Green Breaks also have a positive role to play in urban containment and thus contributing, with other policies, to the more

efficient use of existing urban land and infrastructure. Green Breaks can also play an important role in permitting the natural dispersal of flora and fauna. Within the Green Breaks, the Council recognises that there may be some land-uses that are compatible with the allocation and provide for a beneficial use of such land for example, outdoor recreation, equine activities, allotments, cemeteries and nature conservation. The Council will encourage and support such uses where they enhance and improve existing leisure and recreational facilities and do not prejudice the wider purpose and function of the breaks.

The Council therefore proposes minor amendments to Policy ENV1 and the explanatory text to highlight that certain uses are compatible within the strategic green breaks. The following additions have been included in the Schedule of Proposed Minor Changes (CBC/EB/078);

Policy Env 1

'Third paragraph to read 'Unallocated greenfield land will continue to be protected and where possible enhanced. Development in the open countryside will be strictly controlled to conserve the environmental assets of the borough. Where new development needs a rural location ...'

Supporting Text;

6th paragraph to read 'Development in the countryside is very limited by national and regional policies. Development will be directed away from areas designated for their high natural and cultural heritage value. Where new development needs a rural location, it should enhance the distinct local character of the landscape and have a positive benefit to the local economy and community. Within the green breaks, the Council recognises that there may be some land-uses that are compatible with the green breaks and which provide a beneficial use of such land for example, outdoor recreation, equine activities, allotments, cemeteries and nature conservation. Such developments will be encouraged and supported where they enhance and improvement existing leisure, tourism and recreational facilities, and do not prejudice the wider purpose and function of the breaks.'

- (g) Should there be more reference to the Abberton Reservoir to show link to other agencies and to show that the environmental impact of enlargement has been considered? What is proposed there in terms of any new visitor development?

The policies in the Core Strategy provide the strategic context for future development in the Borough. It is not the role of the Core Strategy to include information about detailed planning applications for specific development.

Within the context of the Core Strategy, Abberton Reservoir is significant as an environmental asset and recreational site. The catchment area of the reservoir, which is owned by Essex and Suffolk Water, is largely outside the Borough.

The environmental aspects of Abberton Reservoir have been considered in the Appropriate Assessment (AA) (CBC/SUB/011). The Reservoir is a Ramsar Site (Wetland of International Importance for Birds), a Special Protection Area (SPA) designated under the EU Birds Directive, and a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The AA assessed any likely significant effects arising from proposals in the Core Strategy on all the European sites, including Abberton Reservoir. This approach underpins Policy ENV1 which seeks to conserve and enhance sites of international, national and local importance and does not support developments that are likely to have an adverse impact on Natura 2000.

The emerging Haven Gateway Green Infrastructure Strategy (HGGIS) (CBC/EB/067) has identified Abberton Reservoir as a potential area of new accessible natural strategic green space.

For information, a full planning application for the Abberton Reservoir Scheme has recently been submitted and the full vision, design, environmental assessment, and lists of stakeholders and consultees have been provided as part of this process.

The application was accompanied by a full Environmental Statement, a design brief, which includes proposals for a new visitor/education centre and a design and access statement which explains proposed improvements to the public rights of way network, public transport links, cycling links and expanded areas where disabled individuals can move without hindrance. This information supports the appropriate assessment.

The application (ref number 080194) can be viewed on the Colchester Borough Council website (www.colchester.gov.uk). This identifies all the agencies that have been involved with the proposed development and demonstrates how environmental impacts have been addressed. It is hoped that the scheme will be fully operational by 2014.